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# Clark Clifford's Confession

WASHINGTON

Do you remember what Watergate was all about? It was about the intrusion by the party in power into the rights of political challengers — the Ins using their power unfairly to block the Outs.

In his eye-popping memoirs, "Counsel to the President," Clark Clifford shows in exquisite detail how Lyndon Johnson colluded with Moscow — and abused the power of our intelligence agencies — to try to block Richard Nixon's challenge and swing the 1968 election to the Democrats' Hubert Humphrey.

That revelation was not Mr. Clifford's intent, of course; on the contrary, this Democrat, whose civilized partisanship I have long admired, charges the Nixon campaign with "gross, even potentially illegal, interference with the security affairs of the nation" by encouraging South Vietnam to avoid participating in a Paris meeting central to a 1968 election-weekend stunt.

But he and collaborator Richard Holbrooke, to their credit, lay out the damning facts about L.B.J.'s last-minute bombing halt and abortive peace conference designed to attract dovish voters to Hubert Humphrey.

Three weeks before Election Day, writes Clifford, Moscow sent an urgent message to Johnson: "if the U.S. stopped the bombing of North Vietnam, Hanoi would agree to the participation of the Saigon government in the negotiations that would follow immediately."

L.B.J. was suspicious of this sudden Communist turnabout, and Mr. Clifford, then Defense Secretary, "remembered [Averell] Harriman's prediction that Moscow would try to prevent a victory by Nixon, whom they still regarded as an unreconstructed Cold Warrior."

But Moscow's interest in stopping Mr. Nixon paralleled the Democrats' interest. L.B.J. agreed, on condition "that negotiations begin within 24 hours after the cessation of the bombing" — i.e., in time for Election Day.

The U.S. election results would have been reversed but for the refusal of South Vietnam's President Thieu to attend the Paris photo opportunity. A Nixon supporter, Anna Chennault, had told him this was a ploy to defeat Nixon, who would be a more steadfast ally than Humphrey.

Under pressure from Moscow's Aleksei Kosygin and badgered by Clifford, L.B.J. — though queasy at selling out the South Vietnamese to elect Humphrey — announced a last-minute bombing halt and peace conference. Artfully, Clifford masked South Vietnam's absence in an L.B.J. statement hailing a conference at which Saigon was "free to participate."

As a Nixon speechwriter, I saw that curious phrase through speechwriters' eyes: why *free to*, not *will*? It meant that President Thieu had refused to play the Democrats' game. While Bryce Harlow drafted a pious statement from Nixon, the rest of us passed the word that L.B.J. "didn't have his ducks in a row." The media reported that fact, and the Democrats' last-ditch attempt to manipulate public opinion failed.

In castigating Mrs. Chennault for foiling the scheme, Mr. Clifford is forced to reveal the basis of his suspicion of her: "the information had been derived from extremely sensitive intelligence-gathering operations of the F.B.I., the C.I.A., and the National Security Agency; these included surveillance of the Ambassador of our ally, and an American citizen with strong political ties to the Republicans."

Recognizing that this was a startling admission of the abuse of government power to defeat a political opponent, Mr. Clifford footnotes: "It should be remembered that the public was considerably more innocent in such matters in the days before the Watergate hearings..."

John Mitchell, Nixon's 1968 campaign manager, knew what Mrs. Chennault — who needed no guidance — was doing. Later, as Attorney General, he learned from the F.B.I. and

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The New York Times **A31**  
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C.I.A. exactly how the White House orchestrated N.S.A.'s eavesdropping on Nixon's "Dragon Lady" and C.I.A.'s illegal surveillance of national-security aide Richard Allen. Returning to manage the 1972 Nixon campaign, Mitchell entrusted such unlawful intrusions to amateurs, for which he was jailed.

Two days before he died in 1988, as I needed him over lunch for tapping my phone, Mr. Mitchell replied: "I learned everything I knew about political surveillance from L.B.J. in '68 — except to leave it to the professionals."

Clark Clifford's memoirs confirm that: Watergate's crimes grew from seeds planted in the power abuses of the Johnson Administration's "October surprise."